Psalm 118 | Jewish Awareness Ministries

Daniel Trimpey

By Jeffrey Berg

Psalm 118 is a magnificent illustration of God bringing life from the dead. A “Hallel Psalm,” this psalm of praise is of utmost importance. In Judaism it is read from the Haggadah in the Passover celebration and magnifies the topic of redemption in the Messiah. Psalm 118 is also read throughout the Feast of Tabernacles (Succot) and is highlighted on the final day known as Hoshannah Rabbah, taken from Psalm 118:25. The Jewish people wave their palm branches and plead, “save now”, for the redemption to come. These two holidays point to Psalm 118 as a very glorious Messianic Psalm.

Historically, Psalm 118 testifies to the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles after the completion of the second Temple according to Nehemiah 8:13-18. The Jewish people, in 586 B.C., were a civilization that God removed from their land to be slaves in Babylon for seventy years. They became a lost society. The majority of the people who went into captivity died in Babylon. The Jewish children who went into captivity with their parents were now the elders leading the effort to rebuild the Temple. This was truly a resplendent resurrection of a civilization and faith that was considered dead.

Psalm 118:1-5

The Psalm begins in ecstatic celebration and worship as the builders laid the foundation of the Temple of the LORD. The Psalmist quotes the book of Ezra. “And they sang together responsively in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because *he is* good, for His mercy *endureth* forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid” (Ezra 3:11).

“I called upon the LORD in distress; the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place” (Psalm 118:5). The end of this verse could be rendered from the Hebrew as “answered me in expansiveness.” This cry of distress was a collective cry of the Jewish people when they were captives in Babylon. God answered their

cry in “expansiveness” or in today’s terms, God answered “big time!”

Psalm 118:6-14

The next eight verses reflect on the discouragement, the pain, and distress that the Jewish people endured as they began to rebuild the Temple. Verses 8 and 9 speak of the delays that came from protests by the enemy. Although the work of rebuilding began under Cyrus, it wasn’t until Darius came to power that they were allowed to resume (Ezra 4).They learned a painful lesson on how little they could trust in princes, according to verse 9. The Samaritans harassed the Jewish people like a “swarm of bees” (Psalm 118:12 and Ezra 4:1,2).

Through all the trials and discouragement, the LORD delivered the Jewish people to accomplish His will, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem! “The LORD is my strength and my song, and is become my *salvation*” (Psalm 118:14). This is a direct quote of Moses from Exodus 15:2, praising God for His freeing the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage. Psalm 118:14 is also quoted in Isaiah 12:2. This portion of Scripture raises the Psalm to a higher level. When the Jewish people quote this verse in the Passover Seder, they are seeking national redemption. The last words, “my salvation,” can be translated as “my Yeshua” or “my Jesus.” “The LORD is my strength and my song, and is become *my Jesus.*” From Psalm 118:14 through the end of the Psalm, the thrust is strongly Messianic.

Psalm 118:19

“Open to me the gates of righteousness, I will go into them..”

“The gates of righteousness” are not ordinary gates by which to enter the Temple. No evil or defilement can enter, only the righteous. This verse looks forward to the day when the Messiah will rule and reign from the Temple. Isaiah 26:2-4 says it well, “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD forever, for the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength.” Psalm 24:7 adds additional fuel for this verse. “Lift up your heads O ye gates; and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in.” The LORD Himself, in the person of Messiah Jesus, is the King of Glory who will establish His rule there.

Psalm 118:21-22

“I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation.

The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner.”

The architects of the Temple building project had a dilemma. The stones of the new Temple were being fitted together. A precious stone was rescued from the rock pile left from the destruction of Solomon’s Temple. The architects thought that this stone would not be a perfect fit to make the precise right angles to bind the two walls. This beautiful gold Jerusalem stone was pulled out and cast aside. The priests, who were more mindful of the intricacies and traditions of the Temple, overruled the builders, though. They believed this was the right place for this special stone. No other stone could fashion the walls together but this stone. It has become “the head stone of the corner.”

When the Passover Seder meal is celebrated, the Hallel Psalms (psalms of praise) are recited. The cup of redemption is sipped, and the focus of the reading becomes Messianic. Psalm 118:22 stands out like a bright light. “*The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner.*” Oh, if the Jewish worshipper could only see that this is the Messiah, the slain Passover lamb whose blood became the propitiation for our sins. The previous verse, Psalm 118:21, really casts God’s glorious brilliance on verse 22. “*I will praise thee*: *for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation.*” “Salvation” is the Hebrew word “Yeshua,” which is the name Jesus. The believer in Yeshua can shout with praise from the heart, for God has heard him/her and become his Jesus!

Psalm 118:23-24

“This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day which the LORD hath made we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

God performed a great miracle! The Almighty raised the nation from the dead, restored the land, rebuilt their Temple, and gave them freedom.

“This is the day” speaks not of the festival day of Succot, but rather “the day,” “the hour,” that God delivered Israel. What God has done for Israel in this miraculous deliverance, in a higher level prophetically points to Israel’s Messiah. Jesus was the rejected corner stone. His vicarious death on the tree, the shedding of His blood for our sins, and His glorious resurrection can all be elevated to “the day” of redemption! “This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”

Psalm 118:25

“Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity.”

On the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Hoshannah Rabbah (the Great Hosannas) is observed. This is the great day of the festival referred to in John 7:37-39, when Jesus stood in the Temple and proclaimed, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive; for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.” All over the Temple complex and throughout Jerusalem, Jewish people were waving their lulov/palm branches and pleading to God in hundreds of prayers, “Save now!, Save now!, Hoshannah!” This was the height of the Succot holiday. The two designated priests poured water and wine into the Temple altar. This was the water libation when the people prayed for God to bless the land with rain, and more importantly, for the Spirit of God to descend upon the land. As the priest gathered the water with his golden pitcher from the pool of Siloam, the people were dancing with their palm branches and the Levites were blowing trumpets. There was ecstatic joy! “With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of Salvation” (Isaiah 12:2). The ancient Jewish sages proclaimed, “The Holy Spirit dwells in man only through joy.” “Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the LORD; we have blessed you out of the house of the LORD” (Psalm 118:26). These passages point to Messiah Jesus. Is it any wonder that the common people waved palm branches and cried “Hosanna! Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the LORD” (John 11:13) as Jesus descended into Jerusalem on the donkey?

Psalm 118:27

“God is the LORD, which hath shewed us light; bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar.”

Every night during the eight days of Succot, the Temple complex was lit like a torch with everyone celebrating. One could see the light from the Temple complex for miles. The blazing light showcased the Temple as being “The light of the world.” In the midst of all this brilliant light and loud jubilation, Jesus took advantage of the moment again, saying, “I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Conclusion

Verse 28 summarizes the whole Psalm. “Thou art my God, and I will praise thee; Thou art my God, I will exalt thee.” Messiah Jesus is the embodiment of the Holy Temple. He is the stone that the builders refused who became the head stone of the corner. He is the fulfillment of the “Great Hoshannah” prayers. He is the righteous gate. He has become my salvation. Can you say with certainty, “Jesus, you are my God, I will praise you, You are my God, I will exult you?”

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